What is this research about?
This study investigated whether programs within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) — such as French immersion, Special Education, the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP), and the Specialist High Skills Major Program (SHSMP) — were offered equitably to students in secondary schools throughout the TDSB.

What did the researchers do?
The researchers collected data from the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (MoE) website and the Toronto District School Board’s websites including information on the programs and course offerings at TDSB schools during the 2008/9 school year, and the Specialist High Skills Major Program developed by the MoE. The researchers also analyzed data collected from the 2006 Statistics Canada Census in order to identify the average level of family income and parental education within the school population. However, neighbourhood socio-economic status (SES) was determined based upon 2001 data from Social Policy Analysis and Research (SPAR).

The researchers compared TDSB schools to identify whether program and courses were equitably distributed across the board. Specifically, the researchers examined whether schools provided students with the opportunity to:

What you need to know:
Within the publicly-funded Toronto District School Board, the researchers found that secondary students did not have equitable access to TDSB programs. Specifically, schools servicing lower-income communities and schools with a high level of special education students tended to offer less Academic level courses and more vocational programs than other schools.
participate in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT); enroll in a full range of Academic level courses; enroll in gifted programs; enroll in French Immersion programs; enroll in the Advanced Placement Program; enroll in the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program (OYAP); enroll in the Specialist High Skills Major Program (SHSMP).

The researchers analyzed the course offerings in connection to the student demographics represented within the school populations. Demographic information included low income and special education status, as well as the level of parental education. The researchers also correlated program locations to neighborhood socio-economic status across the city of Toronto.

For the purpose of this study, adult education centres, alternative schools, junior high schools and schools geared to English as a Second Language (ESL) students were excluded.

What did the researchers find?
The researchers found a relationship between programs offered and school level demographics. They also found links between neighborhood socio-economic status levels and the types of courses and programming made available to students within their local school.

Schools servicing a greater number of low-income and special education students were more likely to provide access to vocational programs (such as the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program and the Specialist High Skills Major Program) but less likely to provide programs such as French Immersion and university-track programming.

The researchers also reported an over-representation of low-income students in schools with high proportions of students using special education. The combination of low-income and special education status may act as a barrier to post-secondary access for these students.
How can you use this research?
School administrators and teachers may wish to use this research study as a starting point for greater discussions about programs and course offerings within their school.

Administrators may wish to consider the types of programs and courses offered at their schools and whether these programs provide students with a wide and equitable range of options. This study can further support equitable allocation of and access to resources across schools to support low-income and special education students.

School board officials may wish to consider using this research to encourage discussion about the placement of specialized secondary school programs across their board in order to maximize access to all programs for all students.

About the researchers
At the time this research article was published:

Gillian Parekh was completing a PhD in Critical Disability Studies at York University.

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About this summary
The Ontario Education Research Exchange (OERE) is a project of the Knowledge Network for Applied Education Research, an Ontario network promoting the use of research in education. The OERE’s clear language summaries of academic research aim to support this mandate.

This summary has been adapted from the ResearchSnapshot series developed by York University and ResearchImpact and has been developed according to writing and design principles unique to OERE. For more information about this summary or the OERE network please contact oere.knaer.oise@utoronto.ca.

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